

# The Six Bardos: A Vajrayana Buddhist Perspective on Death and Dying

*Venerable Thom Kilts, MA/MDIV, CPE Teaching Supervisor, William Osler  
Health System*

## The Six Bardos-What is a Bardo?

---

The Tibetan word *bardo* (བར་དོ་ Wylie: *bar do*) means literally "intermediate state"—also translated as "transitional state" or "in-between state" or "liminal state". In Sanskrit the concept has the name *antarabhāva*. It is a concept which arose soon after the Buddha's passing, with a number of earlier Buddhist groups accepting the existence of such an intermediate state, while other schools rejected it.

## The Six Bardos-What is a Bardo?

---

Used loosely, the term "bardo" refers to the state of existence intermediate between two lives on earth. According to [Tibetan](#) tradition, after death and before one's next birth, when one's consciousness is not connected with a physical body, one experiences a variety of phenomena. These usually follow a particular sequence of degeneration from, just after death, the clearest experiences of reality of which one is [spiritually](#) capable, and then proceeding to terrifying hallucinations that arise from the impulses of one's previous unskillful actions. For the prepared and appropriately trained individuals the bardo offers a state of great opportunity for liberation, since transcendental insight may arise with the direct experience of reality, while for others it can become a place of danger as the [karmically](#) created hallucinations can impel one into a less than desirable [rebirth](#).

## The Six Bardos-What is a Bardo?

---

The term *bardo* can also be used metaphorically to describe times when our usual way of life becomes suspended, as, for example, during a period of illness or during a meditation [retreat](#). Such times can prove fruitful for spiritual progress because external constraints diminish. However, they can also present challenges because our less skillful impulses may come to the foreground.

## The Six Bardos

---

- Franseca Fremantle states that there are six traditional bardo states known as the [Six Bardos](#): the Bardo of This Life; the Bardo of Meditation; the Bardo of Dream; the Bardo of Dying; the Bardo of Dharmata; and the Bardo of Existence.
- The first bardo begins when we take birth and endures as long as we live. The second is the bardo of dreams. The third is the bardo of concentration or meditation. The fourth occurs at the moment of death. The fifth is known as the bardo of the luminosity of the true nature. The sixth is called the bardo of transmigration or karmic becoming.

# The Six Bardos

---

- **Kyenay bardo** (*skye gnas bar do*): is the first bardo of birth and life. This bardo commences from conception until the last breath, when the [mindstream](#) withdraws from the body.
- **Milam bardo** (*rmi lam bar do*): is the second bardo of the dream state. The Milam Bardo is a subset of the first Bardo. [Dream Yoga](#) develops practices to integrate the dream state into Buddhist [sadhana](#).
- **Samten bardo** (*bsam gtan bar do*) is the third bardo of [meditation](#). This bardo is generally only experienced by meditators, though individuals may have spontaneous experience of it. Samten Bardo is a subset of the Shinay Bardo.
- **Chikhai bardo** (*'chi kha'i bar do*): is the fourth bardo of the moment of death. According to tradition, this bardo is held to commence when the outer and inner signs presage that the onset of death is nigh, and continues through the dissolution or transmutation of the [Mahabhuta](#) until the external and internal breath has completed.

# The Six Bardos

---

- **Chönyi bardo** (*chos nyid bar do*): is the fifth bardo of the luminosity of the true nature which commences after the final 'inner breath' (Sanskrit: [prana](#), [vayu](#); Tibetan: [rlung](#)). It is within this Bardo that visions and auditory phenomena occur. In the Dzogchen teachings, these are known as the spontaneously manifesting [Thödgal](#) (Tibetan: *thod-rgyal*) visions. Concomitant to these visions, there is a welling of profound peace and pristine awareness. Sentient beings who have not practiced during their lived experience and/or who do not recognize the clear light (Tibetan: [od gsal](#)) at the moment of death are usually deluded throughout the fifth bardo of luminosity.
- **Sidpa bardo** (*srid pa bar do*): is the sixth bardo of becoming or transmigration. This bardo endures until the inner-breath commences in the new transmigrating form determined by the "karmic seeds" within the [storehouse consciousness](#).

# The Six Bardos-Fremantle Quote

---

- “Originally bardo referred only to the period between one life and the next, and this is still its normal meaning when it is mentioned without any qualification. There was considerable dispute over this theory during the early centuries of Buddhism, with one side arguing that rebirth (or conception) follows immediately after death, and the other saying that there must be an interval between the two. With the rise of mahayana, belief in a transitional period prevailed. Later Buddhism expanded the whole concept to distinguish six or more similar states, covering the whole cycle of life, death, and rebirth. But it can also be interpreted as any transitional experience, any state that lies between two other states. Its original meaning, the experience of being between death and rebirth, is the prototype of the bardo experience, while the six traditional bardos show how the essential qualities of that experience are also present in other transitional periods. By refining even further the understanding of the essence of bardo, it can then be applied to every moment of existence. The present moment, the now, is a continual bardo, always suspended between the past and the future.”



# The Tibetan Book of the Dead

---

- The *Bardo Thodol* ([Tibetan](#): བར་དོ་ཐོས་གྲོལ, [Wylie](#): *bar do thos grol*), *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State*, is a text from a larger corpus of teachings, the *Profound Dharma of Self-Liberation through the Intention of the Peaceful and Wrathful Ones*, revealed by [Karma Lingpa](#) (1326–1386). It is the best-known work of [Nyingma](#) literature, known in the West as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.
- The Tibetan text describes, and is intended to guide one through, the experiences that the consciousness has after death, in the [bardo](#), the interval between death and the next [rebirth](#). The text also includes chapters on the [signs of death](#) and rituals to undertake when death is closing in or has taken place.

# The Tibetan Book of the Dead-Mandala of Wrathful and Peaceful Deities



# The Tibetan Book of the Dead

---

## Six bardos as presented in TBD:

The *Bardo Thodol* differentiates the intermediate state between lives into three bardos:

- The *chikhai bardo* or "bardo of the moment of death", which features the experience of the ["clear light of reality"](#), or at least the nearest approximation of which one is spiritually capable;
- The *chonyid bardo* or "bardo of the experiencing of reality", which features the experience of [visions](#) of various [Buddha](#) forms, or the nearest approximations of which one is capable;
- The *sidpa bardo* or "bardo of rebirth", which features karmically impelled hallucinations which eventually result in rebirth, typically [yab-yum](#) imagery of men and women passionately entwined.

# The Tibetan Book of the Dead

---

## **Six bardos as presented in TBD:**

The *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State* also mentions three other bardos:

- "Life", or ordinary waking consciousness;
- "Dhyana" (meditation);
- "Dream", the dream state during normal sleep.
- Together these "six bardos" form a classification of [states of consciousness](#) into six broad types. Any state of consciousness can form a type of "intermediate state", intermediate between other states of consciousness. Indeed, one can consider any momentary state of consciousness a bardo, since it lies between our past and future existences; it provides us with the opportunity to experience reality, which is always present but obscured by the projections and confusions that are due to our previous unskillful actions.

# Chikhai Bardo

---

The *chikhai bardo* or "bardo of the moment of death", which features the experience of the ["clear light of reality"](#), or at least the nearest approximation of which one is spiritually capable;

- For some this has been translated as the flash of dharmata---the true nature of existence or even (g)od. The training in meditation, especially Dzogchen and Mahamudra respectively, focuses on becoming capable or recognizing this pure and natural state, so that upon the time of death the practitioner will be aware of this “flash,” and ideally merge with it or realize its true nature etc.
- For most of us this will not occur due to our inability and we will then have to rely on the next stage of the bardo in order to possibly direct or influence our karmic conditioning and rebirth.



# Chonyid bardo

---

The *chonyid bardo* or "bardo of the experiencing of reality", which features the experience of [visions](#) of various [Buddha](#) forms, or the nearest approximations of which one is capable;

- The process of reading out loud the “Great Liberation Through Hearing....” to a person who has already passed for 40 days/nights is to aid that person through this stage of the bardo experience. The text outlines and describes in detail the expected energies, forms, colors, experiences etc. so the person who has died will have a chance to recognize these sometimes peaceful or wrathful states as product of mind and karmic winds.
- A person will either attach to peaceful forms or be adverse to wrathful forms by encapsulating around a self illusion which in turn leaves them susceptible to karmic winds and patterns.

# Chonyid bardo and the Five Buddha Wisdoms

---

The *chonyid bardo* is usually worked with through practice by working directly with the Five Buddha Wisdoms or families;

The buddha families are traditionally displayed as the mandala of the five *tathagatas*, dhyanas or buddhas. The mandala (from the Sanskrit for “circle”) aids meditators in understanding how different aspects of existence operate together in an integrated whole.

Each of the buddhas in the mandala embodies one of the five different aspects of enlightenment. However, these manifest themselves not only as enlightened energies but also as neurotic states of mind. The buddha families therefore present us with a complete picture of both the sacred world of enlightened mind and the neurotic world of ego-centered existence. We see that they are indeed the same thing; the path of awakening is what makes the difference.

# THE FIVE WISDOM BUDDHAS



## RATNASAMBHAVA

His nature is gift-bestowing

"I will bestow the Dharma and inspire generosity."



## AKSHOBYA

His nature is as vast and immutable as space

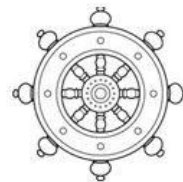
"I will give stability and humility until purpose is fulfilled."



## VAIROCANA

He is the embodiment of the all-comprising reality of the Dharma

"I will combine all your efforts and direct them."



## AMITABHA

His nature is infinite light

"I will help you see the beauty of the Dharma and discern its profound truth."



## AMOGASIDDHI

His nature is to accomplish the words of the Dharma by the power of compassion

"I will inspire you with energy and compassion."





# Chonyid bardo

---

- The purpose of working with the Five Buddha Wisdoms is to be prepared upon death to relate to the manifestations of those energies in a progressive way. By relating with each energy as Buddha wisdom, one then does not give into fear and anxiety but is proactive in integrating and liberating both peaceful and wrathful experiences. This of course can lead to liberation while in the *chonyid bardo*.
- But as in all Buddhist teachings the desire and impulse to formulate a separate self through the experience, as is done in each moment during life, can then create terrorizing and/or pleasant experiences that are responded to through egoic logic, emotion and preservation which then causes the unconscious manifestation of the next bardo stage.

## Sidpa bardo

---

The *sidpa bardo* or "bardo of rebirth", which features karmically impelled hallucinations which eventually result in rebirth, typically [yab-yum](#) imagery of men and women passionately entwined.

- The last hope in this bardo is being able to direct your rebirth, but usually by this point we are so caught up in the karmic winds that we are completely unconscious of this stage and process. If we were to relate to the yab-yum experience as Buddhas (or spiritual beings) in embrace, there is a better chance of a positive rebirth.
- Rebirth means a new beginning of the constant cyclical nature of samsara. This means we continue to be caught up in this cycle and unable to experience liberation. Of course if we are fortunate enough to achieve a human rebirth we have a good chance of hearing the teachings and experiencing liberation through continual upcoming bardo experiences. But of course if one wants to escape this cycle then one needs to commit to spiritual practice.

# Traditional Yab-Yum Buddha Image

---



# Understanding the Six Bardos

---

- The main crux of these teachings is to highlight that the experience of bardo is ongoing through each moment and in every transition. In this way each aspect of life is preparation for death and vice versa (--each aspect of death is a preparation for life).
- The spiritual philosophy of the six bardos can be integrated and applied to other spiritual traditions as the emphasis is on utilizing experience as spiritual practice. One can derive from this system that every transition in life---illness, divorce, etc., has the potentiality to be an opportunity for liberation or a deep spiritual experience if related to and utilized properly.
- This of course has implications for the importance of spiritual care in hospitals, long term care, hospices etc., where patients are all in transitional periods of some sort. This means that in these periods there is tremendous opportunity for spiritual progress and development if related to and worked with properly.

# Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

---

- Sogyal Rinpoche's book, "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying," has now been considered a modern classic in spiritual literature. The book outlines Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the bardo and has been utilized by people of many backgrounds and traditions:

Sogyal Rinpoche said in his introduction to the revised edition:

“Nurses, doctors, and those professionally involved with care for the dying have told me how they have integrated these methods in their daily work, and I have heard many accounts of ordinary people using these practices and finding that they transformed the death of a close friend or relative. Something I find especially moving is that this book has been read by people with different spiritual beliefs, and they have said that it has strengthened and deepened their faith in their own tradition. They seem to recognize the universality of its message, and understand that it aims not to persuade or convert, but simply to offer the wisdom of the ancient Buddhist teachings in order to bring the maximum possible benefit.”

# The Six Bardos

---

The Six Bardo concept is a powerful organizing principle where each moment of experience is related to as an opportunity for spiritual growth, depth and/or liberation.

It also holds up the positive and spiritual aspect of transitional periods. Instead of transitions being overly difficult experiences that one runs away from, they can instead be powerful opportunities for spiritual growth.

The notion of being able to work with others during the dying process and even after death is intriguing and can be a way to comfort the grieving family, friends, practitioners, etc.

## Resources

---

- “The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo.” Many translations available, the best versions are through Shambhala Publications and translated by Franseca Freemantle and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
- “Luminous Emptiness” by Francesca Freemantle
- “The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying” by Sogyal Rinpoche
- “Peaceful Life, Peaceful Death,” by Tulku Thondop Rinpoche
- “The Five Buddha Wisdoms,” by Irini Rockwell
- “Orderly Chaos,” “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism,” “The Lion’s Roar,” and “Transcending Madness,” by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche



# Questions and Comments

---

- What does this challenge or is similar to your own spiritual belief and/or tradition?
- What implications can this have for those providing spiritual care?
- How can you integrate these teachings with your own spiritual tradition/practice?
- ????





# OUR VISION

PATIENT-INSPIRED HEALTH CARE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES